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ABSTRACT

When studying nature and its wonders, children need to be the explorers, the innovators, and the teachers. The adult assumes the role of a facilitator, an observer, and a mediator. If the adult in a given situation is simultaneously and genuinely exploring the area (not just observing children acting upon it), then a bridge may be started to the children's involvement--involvement often being contagious. This paper describes a workshop in which activities stress a wonderment and reverence for life and nature. Participants are encouraged to be keenly aware of children's interests, concerns, and development so that they can "start where the learner is" to create learning situations as rich and exciting as life itself. Using the dandelion as an example, the paper shows how to create a remarkable experience for children by making a "grand performance" out of the discussion. Detailed instructions describe how to create a "nature journal" out of chipboard, muslin and liquid starch, and then use natural inks and quills to paint pictures or record feelings and reflections in the journal throughout the year. (Author/TSP)

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Living with the Earth: An Outside Interactive Acclimatizing Workshop

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ABSTRACT

Children need to be in the position where they are the explorers, the innovators, and the teachers. The adult assumes the role of a facilitator, an observer, and a mediator. If the adult in a given situation is himself simultaneously and genuinely exploring the area (not just observing children acting upon it), then a bridge may be started to the children's involvement — involvement often being contagious. "In sharing such enjoyment with children, there is a communication of the fact that as observers and learners, we are of the same stuff. To be present, but unresponsive, often communicates a failure to value" (Hawkins, 1968). Activities in this workshop stress both understanding and a reverence for life. Participants make and use Nature Journals; discover and use numerous natural paint brushes; participate in many acclimatizing activities (observational games), go "grokking" (an exhilarating sensory tool), and delight in each other.

> Morning is glad on the hills.
> The sky sings in blue tones.
> Little blue fleurs are early blooming now.
> I do so like blue.
> It is glad everywhere.
> When I grow up I am going to write a book
> about the glad of blues.
> The earth sings in green
>
> (Whiteley, 1984).

Children are realists. They want to experience things first-hand — theory means little or nothing to them. From studying nature and its wonders, life becomes a little more understandable and touchable. Even more appealing is the fact that learning outdoors is fun and gives children a feeling of having a good

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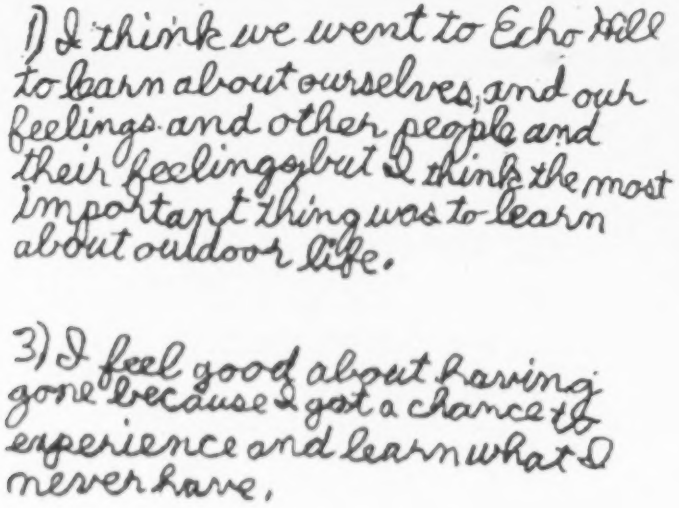
time while learning. And while having fun learning together outdoors, children become more friendly and outgoing.

Excerpts from Ricky's Nature Journal Entries:


1) I think we went to Echo Hill to learn about ourselves, and our feelings and other people and their feelings, but I think the most important thing was to learn about outdoor life.

3) I feel good about having gone because I got a chance to experience and learn what I never have.

Starting Where the Learner Is

Ricky emphasized that learning about "outdoor life" is important. From his fourth-grade perspective, and mine, environmental education is that process of exploring the environment to make sense out of it. And it leads to the following understandings: what you are, where you are going, and what you do with what you know.

Children need to be in the position where they are the explorers, the innovators, and the teachers. The adult assumes the role of a facilitator, an observer, and a mediator. And if the adult in a given situation is himself simultaneously and genuinely exploring the area (not just observing children acting upon it), then a bridge may be started to the childrens' involvement — involvement often being contagious. "In sharing such enjoyment with children, there is a communication of the fact that as observers and learners, we are of the

same stuff. To be present, but unresponsive, often communicates a failure to value" (Hawkins, 1968).

Experiential educators should be excited by children, learning, and by life itself. They should like to laugh and want to open new doors of perception for their learners — of all ages — finding ways to turn children on to the natural world, to help them love it, not for its labels and fears, but as an intrinsic part of themselves.

In *A Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson (1965) speaks of the importance of this excitement:

> If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder without any such gift from the fairies, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in. Parents often have a sense of inadequacy when confronted on the one hand with the eager, sensitive mind of a child, and on the other with a world of complex physical nature, inhabited by a life so various and unfamiliar that it seems hopeless to reduce it to order and knowledge. In a mood of self-defeat, they exclaim, "How can I possibly teach my child about nature — why, I don't even know one bird from another!"
>
> I sincerely believe that for the child, and for the parent seeking to guide him, it is not half so important to know as to feel. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow. The years of early childhood are the time to prepare the soil. Once the emotions have been aroused — a sense of the beautiful, the excitement of the new and the unknown, a feeling of sympathy, pity, admiration or love — then we wish for knowledge about the object of our emotional response. Once found, it has lasting meaning. It is more important to pave the way for the child to want to know than to put him on a diet of facts he is not ready to assimilate.

This approach to learning demands a keen awareness of the children's interests, concerns, and development. It necessitates that the teacher create learning situations that are as rich and exciting as life itself, keeping in mind

that one must always start where the learner is, not where the teacher is. "It takes time and experience to find a natural way of stepping in and out of children's involvement" (Hawkins, 1968). It requires that the teacher, like the learner, strive toward "being sensitive to everything around — to the plants, the animals, the trees, the skies, the waters of the river, the bird on the wing; and also to the moods of the people around" (Krishnamurti, 1963).

Nature Journals and Reflection

Demonstrating how to easily make and use Nature Journals is a wonderful way to bring out the joy and marvels that children — and adults — discover upon their explorations and reflections. (See "Nature Journal Construction" at the end of this paper.)

It is important to ask students to extract meaning from their experiences and to translate those insights into new experiences. Just ask them to tell their stories: to draw, to write, to think, to brood, to capture the moment, to seize the day — all done in the quietness of nature's writing studio — wherever one might be. The act of writing about what one has observed, felt, or done often produces new insights. For some, writing and drawing become an avenue of thinking, for others they provide a means of documenting, and for yet others they give legitimate place for the expression of emotion — a catharsis.

Additionally, there is that magical element of writing with a stick pen or a feather, using one's naturally made ink (perhaps fall's pokeberries or the treasure of newly fallen walnuts), dipping and re-dipping while excitedly drawing or writing. And it is all done slowly, acknowledging that what goes slow can run deep — and ever so beautiful.

Sometimes children can record what lies behind in order to anticipate what lies ahead. Thinking out loud in the Nature Journal can enable them to savor an experience as rich and colorful as a sunset.

"Experience is not what happens to you, it is what you do with what happens to you" (Huxley, 1972). Huxley's statement is an environmental maxim. Reflecting upon what is drawn or written leads to the vital realization that there is both much to understand in nature, and much to lose.

Grand Performances

Like Ricky and his feelings about people and outdoor life, the experiences that children happen upon or the experiences that are created (for them) should be adventuresome ones — remarkable ones — ones that help make the familiar unfamiliar and ones that center around the idea that everything is becoming something else.

> A teacher placed a group of children around him to start botany. It was toward springtime and the teacher said: "I saw something the other day and I wonder if any of you have seen it? If you know it, don't say what it is.
>
> "I went out and saw something about ten inches high and on top of it was a little ball of fluff, and if you went WOOF, a whole galaxy of stars flew out.
>
> "Now what was it like before the little ball of stars appeared?" the teacher asked. One fellow said, "It was a little flower, like a sunflower, only very small."
>
> "And what was it like before that?" A little girl said, "It was like a little green umbrella, half closed, with a yellow lining showing out."
>
> "Yes, but what was it like before that?" One of them said, "It was a little rosette of green leaves coming out of the ground."
>
> "Now, do you all know what it is?" the teacher asked. They were ready to explode. They roared back, "DANDELION!"
>
> "And did you ever pick dandelions?"
>
> Most of them said yes, but he said, "No. You can't pick a dandelion. That's impossible.

"Bill, what did you get — some of those balls of fluff? And you didn't get any rosette of leaves — all you got was a ball of white fluff?

A dandelion is all of this. So whatever you picked, you only got a fragment of something or other. You can't pick a dandelion, because a dandelion isn't a thing, it's a performance.

And you know, everything is a performance — even you."

Nature Journal Construction

(Easiest, least expensive, and delightfully messy and memorable)

Supplies: chipboard 5-3/4" x 9" x 1/4" thick (cardboard will work, but is not as durable)

liquid starch (great inexpensive adhesive for large numbers or watered down Elmer's Glue®)

8-1/2" x 11" pieces of paper

rubber bands

newspaper (to protect work surface) or flat surface outside

muslin (least expensive bolt you can find) cut into 12" x 9-1/2" pieces

1. Soak muslin in tray of starch. Then squeeze starch out.
2. Lay wet muslin on flat surface and smooth it out.
3. Soak two pieces of chipboard (the journal's covers) and hold on an angle over tray, allowing excess starch to drip off. If possible, have a partner squeegee it some.
4. Lay a chipboard, centered on muslin, with pinky-width space between pieces.
5. Fold corners of muslin inward like a dog-ear – cursor shape, etc.
6. Fold all four edges of muslin onto a chipboard.
7. Soak an 8-1/2" x 11" piece of paper in starch, squeegee it off, and lay it over folded edges. This will hold down muslin edges and act as front and back inside cover of journal when dry.

8. Find a small tree and use low branches as hangers. Full sun will dry journals in a couple hours, or set on newspaper on window sills to dry over night.

9. Either use rubber bands, leather (or you can sew), to hold 10–20 pieces of paper. Additional papers may be added.

10. On the first day of use, the following is a wonderful way of beginning a truly different and meaningful NATURE JOURNAL:

    Take joy in doing this yourself or with a friend — only in this way can you become excited about "nature's paint brushes." It will also greatly assist you in the pitfalls, etc., that will arise with your population — and it TRULY works with all ages — young children and way beyond.

    Pick a field or an area where you know there are a lot of flowers, berries, shades of green, different browns from dirt, clay, or bring pieces of charcoal with you.

    Make a palette of 20 or more colors.

    Share all the palettes, like having an art show.

    Go back another time, or the same day, and paint that exquisite painting using the endless sources of paints all around you. Then have a grand art show with children coming up one at a time, demonstrating and describing their painting.

    Send me some of the paintings!

11. Use the endless bag of tricks you possess for outside acclimatizing activities — always having your students keep their Nature Journals in their bookbag, tucked in their pants, or in their hands. Nature Journals can be used all year long. Some seasons offer more paints than others. But you will become amazed at where Mother Nature hides some of her paints.

12. To make your newly made Nature Journals unique, gather pokeberries in the fall. Have the children crush them up using an old-fashioned meat grinder, mortar and pestle, or a blender. Use the ink as a bright magenta color. Walnut husks boiled in water makes another marvelous rich brown ink.

13. Carve sticks, or use feathers for pens.

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